

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Comparative Journeys: Essays on Literature and Religion East and West by Anthony C Yu,

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contributors surely intend. Also, even a nonfan of Gibson or of his film may be left wondering why not even one semisympathetic perspective was solicited to balance out the all but exclusively negative views conveyed here. Exceeding the bounds of critical scholarly inquiry, and entering the sphere of retributive theology, Enders suggests that a CNN report that the film's starring actor and an assistant director were struck by lightning during shooting suggests that "God himself might see fit to punish those who claim that they, and they alone, have access to the meaning of divine truth" (130). One is reminded of Liebkind's outburst in that other Mel's film, *The Producers*: "Yes. The actors. I must destroy the actors."
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YU, ANTHONY C. *Comparative Journeys: Essays on Literature and Religion East and West.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. xix+408 pp. $50.00 (cloth).

In their collaborative work on poetic metaphors, George Lakoff and Mark Turner have shown the tremendous signifying power of the conceptual metaphor, "Life Is a Journey" (*More than Cool Reason* [Chicago, 1989]). This metaphor works in common expressions of our daily language as well as in some of the best-known works of literature. Thus, the title of the collection of Anthony Yu's writings, *Comparative Journeys*, cannot be more appropriate: this handsomely produced volume from Columbia University Press is distilled from a lifetime's work in comparative studies across languages, literatures, disciplinary boundaries, and, most importantly, the usual East-West divide. Moreover, the volume has spiritual journey as a major theme that connects several essays through brilliant discussions of Dante's *Commedia*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and a major sixteenth-century Chinese novel, *Journey to the West*, of which Yu has produced a complete and authoritative translation in English. *Commedia* and *Journey to the West* in particular, as the author shows, are exemplary literary works of religious pilgrimage, each being "at once a magnificent tale of fiction and a complex allegory, in which the central drama of its protagonist's 'approach to God' unfolds within the interplay of the literal and figurative dimensions of the work" (140). Such interplay provides an opportunity for writers to give religious ideas a concrete literary form. This is true of Dante's imaginary journey from the *Inferno* through the *Purgatorio* to reach the *Paradiso*, and also true of the *Journey to the West*, which makes a great novel out of the physical and the spiritual journeys of Xuanzang, the famous seventh-century monk who left China, braving the dangers of treacherous roads, to fetch Buddhist sutras from India. East and West, religion and literature—these are the cardinal points for charting the course of Yu's comparative journeys among the major works of Chinese and European literatures and the Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, and Judeo-Christian traditions.

Though some of the essays in this volume first appeared years ago, Yu's insights and remarks prove to be particularly useful and relevant today. In "Life in the Garden" (first published in this journal in 1980), for example, by drawing on the theological works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, Yu understands Milton's notion of freedom as not "solipsistic" but only fulfilled "in relation to another personal being" (61). The creation of Eve as Adam's helpmate thus fully reveals what *imago dei* means in Gen. 1:27. At the moment of the fall, an ugly quarrel started between Adam and Eve, and in the heat of

that quarrel, it was Eve who first repented and offered to bear the sole responsibility. "By enabling her husband to take the first step toward penitence, which makes possible that process by which 'the inward man is regenerated by God after his own image,'" Yu comments, "Eve has fulfilled her most important responsibility as helpmeet and thereby justifies the wisdom and goodness of her original creation" (72). Given the often heard charge of misogyny against Milton and his poetry, this point cannot be more emphatically reiterated. Based on the enlightened views of modern theology, Yu's argument helps us understand Milton and the religious, philosophical, and social implications of his poetry in much greater depth and with more genuine appreciation.

The most important contribution Yu makes in this book is his detailed and sensitive discussion of religious and literary texts East and West. Many scholars, including such experts on classical Chinese literature as David Hawkes and Burton Watson, understand Chinese literature, even the entire Chinese tradition, as essentially secular; but such a "secularist worldview," Yu maintains, "is a myth" (160). In a number of essays, he takes on the task of dissipating that myth. "Religion and Literature in China" shows the close relationship between Chinese literature and religion, particularly Buddhism. "Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirits!" offers a pioneer study of an often neglected part of Chinese literature dealing with "ghosts" and supernatural beings. Chinese fiction, Yu argues, offers an especially revealing example of the religious dimension of Chinese literature as it originated in the earlier forms of *zhiguai* ("recording the strange or anomalous") and *chuanqi* ("transmitting the marvelous") and "was further enhanced and complicated by the introduction and spread of Buddhism" (162). With erudition and a wealth of textual evidences, Yu makes a convincing case "that the vast panoply of traditional Chinese literature, far from lacking in any religious inspiration, has been touched and even transformed by various religious elements" (166). Yu is a scholar preeminently knowledgeable of the major Chinese novel *The Journey to the West*, and his essays on that novel and related materials not only provide readers with a great deal of information and insight but are also most persuasive in showing the influence of religious elements on traditional Chinese literature.

A final group of essays on such concepts as liberal education and human rights combines Yu's knowledge as a scholar of classical Chinese literature and religion with his concerns as an intellectual with pressing social and political issues of our own times. These essays reveal Yu's passionate commitment to democracy and universal human rights, but they always persuade with quiet reasoning, supported by careful textual analysis and meticulous scholarship. On the one hand, he shows that the ancient Chinese already have notions of the self and rights not completely at odds with modern Western concepts, while, on the other, he clearly rejects the narrow-minded nationalist tendency to propose Confucianism as a viable alternative to the advocacy of rights and democracy. The well-balanced views of a scholar and an intellectual reflect the best of a visionary comparativist, who tries to offer us the best of both East and West in literature, culture, and social and political values. This collection of essays is highly recommended to anyone interested in understanding China and its rich cultural legacies.

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